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ADDRESS

— ON —

The Moral Influence of Free Libraries,

DELIVERED AT THE OPENING OF THE

LONGSIGHT BRANCH LIBRARY,

— ON. —

SATURDAY, JULY 23rd, 1892,

BY

ALEXANDER IRELAND.

Manchester:

HENRY BLACKLOCK & CO., PRINTERS, ALBERT SQUARE.

1892.

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No. 100
1877

1877
No. 100
1877

Manchester Public Free Libraries.

OPENING

OF THE

LONGSIGHT BRANCH LIBRARY.

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The Longsight Branch Free Library, formerly the Mechanics' Institution, Stockport Road, was opened by Mr. Alexander Ireland on the afternoon of Saturday, July 23, 1892, in the presence of a large audience. The Mayor of Manchester (Alderman Bosdin T. Leech) presided, and the ladies and gentlemen on the platform included the Mayoress, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Ireland, the Misses Ireland, Mr. and Mrs. John Mills, Councillor J. W. Southern (chairman of the Free Libraries Committee), Councillor Harry Rawson (deputy-chairman), Aldermen Dr. Russell, Hugo Shaw, and Abraham Lloyd, Councillors Charles Rowley, Reynolds, S. H. Brooks, Norris, Hoy, and Uttley; the Rev. C. P. Roberts (rector of St. John's, Longsight), the Rev. H. Norburn (rector of St. Agnes's, Birch), Messrs. John H. Nodal, Frank Hampson, Thomas Ashbury, C.E., W. H. Flinn, G. H. Swindells, Richard Gill, John Finlayson, Isaac Gleave, F. W. Lean, S. Dewar Lewin, Charles W. Sutton (chief librarian), W. R. Credland (deputy chief librarian), and Lawrence Dillon (superintendent of branches).

The MAYOR said the Longsight Mechanics' Institution dated back to 1854, and it had recently been handed over by the trustees to the Manchester Corporation. He was pleased that they had on the platform that afternoon Councillor Harry Rawson, deputy-chairman of the Free Libraries Committee, who rendered service in the establishment of the institution. Mr. Rawson had long laboured and was still labouring in the cause of free libraries. In 1858 the foundation stone of the present building was laid by Mr. Ivie Mackie, then or subsequently Mayor of Manchester, and the cost was £2,000. Soon afterwards an addition had to be made in the shape of a schoolroom, and the institution had been of great use to the district, the library having been in existence almost from the beginning. As time went on the

promoters disappeared from various causes, and in 1890 a resolution was passed to hand over the institution to the Corporation, and last year dissolution was determined upon. There had been a danger of the library going to decay, as had been the case with many large subscription libraries in Manchester, notably the Portico, through the falling away of the original supporters, and the advantage of the transference here was, he believed, in the permanency of the Corporation. The number of books taken over by the Corporation was 2,701, but they now started with 4,203. The decrease of crime, the quickening of intelligence, and the higher tone in amusements in the county of Lancaster he attributed in great measure to education. But education was a sword which might be used to disadvantage if the people were not taught how to apply it, and he believed that libraries did a great deal in teaching its use. The libraries of the Manchester Corporation were well looked after. No books were admitted that were not instructive, moral, and of high tone. He congratulated Lonsight upon having a free library, and he hoped that the young men and women of the district would make good use of it. They were favoured at the meeting with the presence of their old friend Mr. Alexander Ireland, and they were glad to see him so vigorous in his eighty-third year. Mr. Ireland, in addition to being a literary man himself, has been the friend of Carlyle, Emerson, Froude, Russell Lowell, and William and Robert Chambers, and in his youth had conversed with Sir Walter Scott, which was something to be very proud of.

Mr. ALEXANDER IRELAND then delivered his address as follows:—

It is perhaps not altogether inappropriate that the Committee should have asked me to deliver the opening address on this occasion, for I am the last survivor of the original committee which in 1851 originated the Manchester Free Library, the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, its example being followed by Liverpool in 1853, Birmingham in 1860, and by Leeds in 1870. Forty years have since elapsed, and there are now, I rejoice to tell you, 250 free libraries established and in operation throughout the kingdom, containing probably $3\frac{1}{2}$ million volumes. It is strange to think that the only one now living who assisted at the birth of the first free library should this day be taking a prominent part at the christening of the 250th bantling of that prolific mother. Manchester contains, besides the Reference Library, nine lending libraries and reading-rooms, and three reading-rooms apart from libraries. In Salford there are five libraries. The number of books used last year in the two towns was 1,838,722. We are still far behind the United States in the extension of free libraries. In the State of Massachusetts alone there were a few years ago 175 free town libraries.

Now, try to realise what a benefit it is to a community to have a free library in its midst, to have the privilege of taking to your home, free of any cost whatever, the latest book of travels, or biography, or essays, or fiction, or poetry, or philosophy. To those who feel a desire to acquire knowledge this is an unmixed blessing. Think of the thousands of young men and women scattered among our towns, earning their honest livelihood by various trades and occupations, some of them of a very monotonous and fatiguing character—young persons, many of them with tastes and aspirations above their humble surroundings, naturally wishing to beguile their hours of leisure in some way that will be pleasant and instructive. Here they have an ever-ready means of access to what will conduce to this end, giving them what they long for and daily look forward to—gradually leading to the formation of improved habits and tastes which will abide through life.

And here let me take note of a feature in the means and aids of self-culture which every lover of human improvement must hail with deep satisfaction, and that is the wonderfully cheap production in these days of good books, placing it within the power of the humblest clerk or mechanic or shop girl, if the wish exists, to become the possessor of many excellent books, whether of instruction or entertainment, by the judicious outlay of a few shillings in the course of the year. Are you aware of the remarkable fact that you can become the possessor of Shakspeare's immortal plays by an outlay of one shilling; that you can purchase the *Waverley Novels*, which alone will furnish endless delightful reading, for sixpence each; and that for the insignificant sum of fourpence halfpenny—the cost of an ounce of tobacco, let me remind you—you can procure any of Dickens's or Charles Kingsley's admirable stories? Here is another modern marvel. The firm of Messrs. Cassell have already issued more than 200 little volumes, embracing many of the choicest gems of English literature, at the almost incredible price of threepence a volume. These volumes are exceedingly well printed and in most readable type, and on good paper, and contain 200 pages each. Here, too, is a copy of Charlotte Brontë's novel "*Jane Eyre*," originally published at a guinea and a half, for the insignificant sum of threepence. I look at these volumes and cast a backward glance to the days when I was a lad of 15, and recall the difficulty of procuring books to read at that time. I remember well my passionate admiration of one book, an expensive one, in two volumes, which I wished to possess, but which was far beyond my means of buying, so that there was nothing for it but to spend many months in transcribing it from beginning to end, thus making it all my very own. When I think of those days, now nearly seventy years ago, and contrast them with the present, it is

scarcely possible for me to realise the change which has taken place with regard to the facility of access to books. . . What is the moral of all this change? Surely to be thankful for it and take advantage of it wisely and practically; and be thankful, my friends, that you are living in 1892 and that you were not living in 1825. .

But to return to the special object of this day's gathering. The opening of a free library is an important event in the history of any community. It has been truly said that however excellent a thing a school and college training may be, after all the best and most essential part of every man's education is often that which he gives himself. Now, it is for this kind of self-education that the free library provides the opportunity and the means—assuming always that the inclination exists, and that a certain amount of guidance is available. Whoever facilitates access to books, be he an individual or a corporation of individuals, is a permanent benefactor of his fellow-men. One of the wisest and most clear-sighted of Americans, James Russell Lowell, whom I had the privilege of knowing, has said finer and more pithy things about books and libraries than any modern author, not even excepting such kings in literature as Carlyle, Ruskin, and Emerson. Let me give you a few sentences of his, worthy to serve as an inscription over the entrance of any free library :—

“ Here you are admitted to the whole world of thought, of fancy and imagination—to the company of saint and sage, of the wisest and the wittiest, at their wisest and wittiest moments. It enables you to see with the keenest eyes, hear with the finest ears, and listen to the sweetest voices of all time. More than that, it annihilates time and space for you; it revives for you, without a miracle, the Age of Wonder, endowing you with the shoes of swiftness and the cap of darkness, so that we walk invisible. . . . There are people who will descend to any servility, submit to any insult, for the sake of getting themselves into what is euphemistically called good society. Did it ever occur to them that there is a select society of all the centuries to which they and theirs can be admitted for the asking—a society, too, which will not involve in ruinous expense, and still more ruinous waste of time and health and faculties?”

In addition to Mr. Lowell's words, it occurs to me that I have somewhere read that over the entrance to the famous Alexandrian Library, founded 300 years before the Christian era, were inscribed these words—“The nourishment of the soul.” Another authority says, “The medicine of the soul.” Nothing could have been more significant

or appropriate than either the one or the other of these inscriptions, and they are applicable to all libraries, whether public or private.

Following up Mr. Lowell's happy allusion to the select society which libraries afford us, let us try to realise what it means. We join and mingle in this very interesting company with ease and pleasure, and with a certain feeling of confidence not unmixed with reverence. Here are bishops and archbishops and learned doctors of both Churches, historians and men of science, social and political reformers and idealists, novelists and critics, essayists grave and gay, and philosophical thinkers of every shade of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The sons and daughters of song form part of this goodly company, and add to its variety. Heterogeneous although it may appear, there is nevertheless an essential unity and accordance in this motley company when one comes to hold communion with its separate members in their books. The differences and acrimony that so often divide the writers seem almost to disappear when we hold their volumes in our hands, and the intellectual atmosphere is left clear and undisturbed, as it were, for the fair consideration of their contending thoughts and fancies and opinions.

In an address of this kind my hearers might perhaps expect that I should lay down some rules of guidance to readers. I would hesitate to do this, for their selection of books will in most cases be decided by some determining consideration or circumstance, or by the reader's own mental idiosyncrasy. Some minds care most for the positive knowledge afforded by books of science, some prefer the excitement and stir and novelty met with in books of travel and adventure, others feel strengthened by the examples of endurance and perseverance, the "plain living and high thinking," the struggle with difficulties and evil fortunes, and the final brave success, as revealed in the most captivating biographies. Others take pleasure in following earnest inquirers after truth in their examination of creeds and beliefs and traditions; others, again, prefer to follow the stately march of history, or to find their chief mental sustenance in the most notable works of imagination and fiction, whether in prose or verse. After all, one's choice must generally be determined by one's own tastes and desires. The best books, it has been said, for a man are not always those which the wise recommend, but oftener those which meet the peculiar wants, the natural thirst of his mind, and which, therefore, awaken interest and rivet thought. The great, the essential matter is to feel a lively interest in what you read. Wise, sound-headed, practical Samuel Johnson said: "I would not advise a rigid adherence to a particular line of study. I myself have never persisted in any plan for two days

together. A man ought to read just as inclination leads him, for what he reads as a task will do him little good."

A great deal has been written about desultory reading. If a man reads in the right spirit, and with a relish for what he is reading, that reading may bring more true benefit to him than an apparently deeper and more serious method of study. On this subject you will thank me for reading to you a few weighty and rememberable words of Dr. Arnold, of Rugby, the father of Matthew Arnold :—

"Keep your view of men and things extensive, and depend upon it that a mixed knowledge is not a superficial one. As far as it goes, the views that it gives are true, but he who has read deeply one class of writers alone gets views which are almost sure to be perverted, and which are not only narrow, but false. Adjust your proposed amount of reading to your time and inclination. This is perfectly free to any man, but, whether the amount be large or small, let it be varied in its kind, and widely varied. If I have a confident opinion on any one point connected with the improvement of the human mind it is on this."

Deprecatory remarks are frequently heard regarding the large proportion of volumes of works of imagination and fiction, compared with those of other departments of literature, which is found in many of the free libraries. Now, a man reads either for entertainment or instruction. I would counsel him to mingle both, not allowing entertainment to absorb too great a portion of his leisure hours. But to works of imagination I attach very high importance. "The function of imaginative literature," says John Morley, "is to awaken the sympathies, to quicken the moral sensibilities, and enlarge our moral vision." The sympathies and imagination of those who are engaged all day long in dull and often wearisome work, and whose surroundings it is not in their power to vary, are apt to flag and become languid. To persons in this jaded condition of mind nothing is more refreshing, after the day's work, than to spend an hour or two in reading wholesome works of imagination. The mind readily becomes interested in such reading, and is not taxed by it. The humble home or lonely lodging loses its dulness and monotony, and its occupant escapes to and lives amidst livelier scenes. He becomes detached, as it were, from his present surroundings by the beneficent gift of imagination, and for a time inhabits a brighter world than the one he daily lives in. This power of detachment, one of the most blessed capacities of our nature, gradually but surely exercises its refining influence and ministers to our self-dependence.

While speaking on the subject of imaginative literature and its influences, let me refer to a lecture delivered, a good many years ago to a popular audience, by a distinguished living statesman, Mr. Goschen. It was gratifying to me to find an opinion which I had firmly held for more than half a lifetime endorsed and admirably expressed by one whose previous habits and occupation would have led one to expect an entirely opposite view of the subject. This speaks volumes for Mr. Goschen's many-sidedness of mind, and silently rebukes the narrow judgments we sometimes unthinkingly form of others from our imperfect knowledge of their intellectual endowments. Mr. Goschen's words express so clearly what I think on this subject that I give them in preference to any of my own :—

“I wish you to be able to look beyond your own lives, and have pleasure in surroundings different from those in which you move. I want you to be able to sympathise with other times, to be able to understand the men and women of other countries, and to love the intense enjoyment of mental change of scene. I do not only want you to know dry facts, I want the heart to be stirred as well as the intellect. I want you to feel more and love more than you can do if you only know what surrounds yourselves. I want the action of the imagination, the sympathetic study of history and travels, the broad teaching of the poets, and indeed of the best writers of other times and other countries, to neutralise and check the dwarfing influence of necessarily narrow careers and necessarily stunted lives. That is what I mean when I ask you to cultivate the imagination. I want to introduce you to other, wider, and nobler fields of thought, and to open up vistas of other worlds whence refreshing and bracing breezes will stream upon your minds and souls. . . . And do not believe for one moment that the cultivation of this quality will disgust you or disqualify you for your daily tasks. I hold a very contrary view. I spoke just now of mental change of scene ; and as the body is better for a change of scene and a change of air, so I believe that the mind is also better for occasional changes of mental atmosphere. I do not believe that it is good either for men or women always to be breathing the atmosphere of the business in which they are themselves engaged. I want you, if I may use the phrase, to breathe the bracing ozone of the imagination.”

Before passing from this topic, let me suggest that the supply of works of fiction, while abundant, should exclude third-rate and inferior productions, and everything that is vicious or trashy. Donations of books considered objectionable should be declined as being unsuitable to the objects and aims of free libraries, which are to safeguard and strengthen the young against temptation, by supplying pure, wholesome, and instructive reading.

It would add greatly to the usefulness of free libraries if judicious lists of books in the different departments of literature were drawn up by the librarians, and placed within the reach of readers. I should like to see the introduction of occasional lectures on the choice of books, by competent men, as an adjunct to the free library system.

I should like readers who have a decided taste for literature to devote a few hours occasionally to our old English writers—such as Bacon, Milton, Jeremy Taylor, and Sir Thomas Browne, and their illustrious contemporaries.

Listen to this sentence from Lord Bacon:—“We enter into a desire of knowledge sometimes from a natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite, sometimes to entertain our minds with variety and delight, sometimes for ornament and reputation, sometimes to enable us to victory of wit and contradiction, but seldom sincerely to give a true account of our gift of reason for the benefit and use of man—as if there were sought in knowledge a couch whereupon to rest a searching and restless spirit; or a terrace for a wandering and variable mind to walk up and down, with a fair prospect; or a tower of state for a proud mind to raise itself upon; or a fort of commanding ground for strife and contention; or a shop for profit and sale; and not a rich storehouse for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man’s estate. . . . Good books are true friends that will neither flatter nor dissemble; be you but true to yourself, applying that which they teach, and you will need no other comfort or counsel.”

Here are a few memorable words of Milton:—“Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them, to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are. . . . Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life!”

Another sentence from Milton:—“In those vernal seasons of the year when the air is calm and pleasant it were an injury and sullenness against Nature not to go out, and see her riches, and partake in her rejoicing with heaven and earth.”

Bishop Jeremy Taylor is the poet of divines. Where is there finer poetry than in the following sentences, which are taken from among hundreds equally beautiful:—“Anger is a perfect alienation of the mind from prayer, and therefore is contrary to that state of mind which presents our prayers in a right line to God. For so have I seen a lark rising from his bed of grass, and soaring upwards, singing as he rises, and hopes to get to heaven, and climb above the clouds; but the poor bird was beaten back by the loud sighings of an easterly wind, and his motion made irregular and inconstant, descending more and more at

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